

The Appropriation of Local Culture in Museum Practices: Problems and Possibilities for Philippine Communities

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The paper would like to contribute to the discourse on the politics of public culture in the Philippines by examining the museum practice that deals with displays of "everyday life" that represent notions of local culture.¹ In an era where "globality" is encroaching in a nation's political, economic, social, and cultural agenda, the presence of a significant variety of museums dealing with traditional life ways (peasant) and folk objects is a problematic issue of representation and identity construction of Philippine communities which are grappling with modernity and its effects on everyday life. Recognizing the dangers of museums presenting an exotic gaze on "othered" ethnicities and communities for urban consumption, we can ask: What kind of aesthetics are being constructed and for what purpose? How is the issue of identity being addressed in such a museum and for whom?

Keeping in mind the importance of differences in the mode of production and reception of displayed objects, people as individuals and as a collective construct meaningful signification to what the museum represents in civil society. Museums are spaces where the discourse of an authentic culture through exhibits of "everyday life" is transformed into "displayed life." In the midst of criticism of the prevalent "self-orientalization" or "nativism" in ethnographic and folk museums or even national museums, there is a need to reevaluate the role of such public institutions so that it can address the politics of identity construction and a nation's imagination of itself. Therefore, the paper aims to explore the following ideas: 1) evaluate museum practices dealing with everyday life as sites of "identity construction" of an imagined nation; 2) problematize the issue of representation of "local culture" as appropriated in the museum practice and its relation to tourism; and 3) explore the challenges and possibilities of initiating community museums in the Philippine localities as alternative to the traditional museum

practice. Navigating through these concepts would hopefully reveal new paths in understanding different communities in the Philippines, seeking guidance in directions that their cultural program can take.² At this point, I must explain that I am part of a non-governmental organization which gives value to local cultural research as the basis of "appropriation" of certain motifs of local culture whether it's for community theater, festival management, and community museum. As such, I had to work with various local government units in what may be described as "critical collaboration," hoping for the possibility to instill societal change from within the much-maligned political structure of the Philippines.

The Museum Gaze and Public Culture

Working on the premise that culture is a social construct, a contested and negotiated field of knowledge and articulation, then a critique of the museum gaze is timely in the Philippines as it is implicated in questions of identity in the context of encroaching globality. In more ways than one, museums communicate to a disparate audience or communities, forging an artefactual or artificial experience of homogeneity—a space where social tensions are ironed out and made sensible. With the intention to reveal the politics of collection and display to an enlightened viewer, the call of the times is to be more sensitive to people's lives that are sometimes exploited in the name of culture.

A main concern of the paper is the museum's role in creating a public culture as part of civil society. Economic activities, social life, and cultural affairs are all constructed within civil society and the strength and resilience of a social order resides in the capacity of civil society to aid in shaping the direction of change. As Ivan Karp aptly puts it, "*Civil society is the crucible in which citizenship is forged ... more than a mosaic of communities and institutions, civil society is a stage, an arena in which values are asserted and attempts at legitimation made and contested*" (Karp 1992). As an important element in civil society, museums articulate social ideas. They define relations with communities whether they intend to or not. They construct central and peripheral identities because of particular narrations, of aesthetic privileging and political-economic interests. So that if we consider museums as integral parts of civil society, they often justify their existence on the grounds that they play a major role in expressing, understanding, developing, and preserving the objects, values and knowledge that civil society values.

However, the question remains—who decides what to collect that can represent people's lives and experience? How are social relations forged in the

politics and aesthetics constructed in the museum practice? What values are silenced by the museum practice and what is advanced as true and authentic? As Karp has observed, the traditional roles of museum—collecting, preserving, studying, interpreting, and exhibiting—are now under scrutiny from communities being marginalized by the museum gaze. The realization that the museum audience does not passively accept what they are made to see is to point to the complex and changing nature of public culture. For better or for worse, there is a wide acceptance in civil society that museums are regarded as the spaces for defining who people are, how they should act, and as a place for challenging outdated and oppressive representations.³

The Display of Everyday Life and Cultural Appropriations

Museums dealing with objects used in everyday life assume that there are specific ways of seeing and valuing that can be taught to urban culture which is marked by its “stranger mentality”—the absence of community solidarity. We do not actually “know” our neighbor because there is nothing that ties us beyond the family, only a network of friends and professional colleagues. Therefore the modern city has to create cultural symbols so that people can have a sense of commonality and communality that will bind people together, imagining, feeling, and acquiring the same things. As a state apparatus, museums contribute to the notion of a homogenous culture and as arbiter of what is acceptable and not. It engages in the production of knowledge that vie for space in the modern Filipino consciousness, especially in the urban centers of power.

The core issue that sustains the old museum practice is based on the idea of “authenticity”—a perspective that there are truth claims on cultural ethnicities that are factual and unchanging over time. It is also an emotional issue because collective identity, territoriality, and historical claims are involved. However difficult it is to define, the discourse on authenticity always revolves around “power” and “authority” on the one hand—and “misrepresentation” and “marginalization” on the other. Once applied to the museum practice of starting a collection, we have to understand that objects in themselves have no authority, but people do. We ascribe meaning to objects, then we label them as “material culture” or “cultural heritage.” But as a kind of discourse, we must ask “What does the label of authenticity privilege and what does it deny?”

Since the objects or artifacts control the focus of the exhibition in museums, objects which were rejected by an elite collector becomes “silences” in the collection.

The colonial experience of the Philippines becomes important in determining the nature of most museum collection embarked on by colonizers which we now ascribe as collection of the "nation." One can easily conclude that they were guided by the exoticizing eye, the "Filipino" as the European's "other." If one is to embark on an alternative museum practice that wishes to overcome the colonial trap, then one must reorient the museum practice that place more importance on people and their capacity to interpret and create contemporary meanings, rather than collect "objects" that stereotypically give image to an indigenous "Filipino-ness." On the last point, one might say that in the case of an indigenous community, they would not see the importance of displaying the objects that represent their everyday life if that culture is still lived and experienced in their community. However, an urban audience experiences the systematic loss of identity brought by colonization and globalization has more need for an appropriated life experiences to create a sense of a nation authenticated by ethnicity.

National Museums, the Culture of Collecting, and Appropriated Local Cultures

We can say that the idea of nations is intimately intertwined with the idea of national museums as markers of its achievements in the passage of time. We remember the story of Noah in the Bible, where he saved as many living things as he could in his famous ark, and felt the need to classify and organize God's creations for a promised future (Elsner and Cardinal 1994). The birth of national museums follows the same pattern: first is the felt need to collect so that the past is brought to the present, second is the impetus to organize and classify so that collections become meaningful, and lastly, is the language of display—how does one exhibit collections for a diverse public that would be cohesive and representational of interests of the state and its people? Objects from everyday life are imagined to be saved from the deluge of time, natural catastrophe, and social upheaval to serve as a stable past for a continuously changing present.

We can also observe that the chosen sites of national museums are also symbolic of the cultural claims of the economic and political centers of the nation. Significantly, the concept of a national museum is a claim to civilization, so that more than the objects, the context of viewing and its attendant atmosphere are as important.

The concept and collection of the Philippine National Museum started at the later end of the 19th century under Spanish colonialism and has experienced

a tumultuous history during the American rule, World War II bombings, and loss of important artifacts to influential museums abroad. During the last decade, the museum was rehabilitated as it was transferred to the Finance Building originally constructed in the American occupation. Aspiring to be "The Museum of the Filipino People," the method of display has been modernized to include interactive programs side by side with its archeological, ethnographic, and thematical displays. There is a strong awareness of the diversity of ethnicities that forms the nation, although mostly silent in Muslim identity and their sense of history fighting the colonizers and continuing oppression.

Without an organized group tour, it is difficult to persuade people to visit museums. One possible explanation is that there is still no felt need to view a displayed life that is still played out in the everyday social life. It could be that the Philippines urban culture has not rapidly changed the everyday landscape, where traditions are still played out meaningfully with social change. Yet, whether there is an interest or not, as part of civil society, museums in the Philippines appropriate various ethnic emblems and objects as the basis of the Philippine nation.

In the Philippines, the term "art" and "craft" would be problematic to traditional communities where spheres of knowledge are intimately intertwined despite modern encroachment. In the academe, there are attempts on a discourse on folk art called *sining bayan* or *katutubong sining* with its own aesthetics based on environmental and social context. Since the fine arts come from a Western tradition, the traditional folk crafts shaped by the diverse Philippine landscape are seen as bastions of ethnicity, honesty, and purity. There are no specific museums in the Philippines dealing with folk art, but the former Museum of Philippine Ethnography in the Nayong Pilipino park dealt with displays of everyday life and objects such as textiles and farming implements mainly from the indigenous groups of the Northern Luzon and Southern Mindanao. The display underscores the cultural context of the textiles but the orientation is mainly visual and discourages interaction. In addition, the touted representations of the Philippine village as an open museum loses much of its credibility when the attitudinal concerns of the guides or docents are mainly economic—making you buy the varied array of souvenir folk art items or tourist art. There are instances where the staff of each "regional" house openly welcomes a visitor with flashy cameras because it signifies "buying power." Another thematic exhibition on life ways is the *Diwa: Buhay at Ritual* or the *Museo ng Kalinangang Pilipino* housed in a small gallery at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The main problem here is accessibility to the public and the symbolic meaning still associated with CCP, however misplaced, as a Marcosian creation.

Both museums attempted in situ (context) display by using mannequins giving approximations of how people have lived and still live today. But the resulting display is one of exoticism—faraway static communities untouched by modernity (except for the Converse shoes worn by the male mannequin of the *araquio* tableaux at CCP). The contemporariness of culture and its possible emergence, is subsumed as unchanging coming from the past: a “narrative of loss”, of innocence, loss of purity, and loss of meaning for the benefit of tourists and an urban-based audience. Yet in our own history, indigenous communities have experienced many encroachments and exploitation from the outside world in the name of imperial dreams and display. For one, they have been exploited before in International Expositions at the turn of the 20th century when they were shipped to the United States to perform/live as display objects in the middle of winter. Many died during that journey, forgotten and lost in historical memory.

Nowadays, there are attempts to correct the sins of the past by giving awards from the state such as “Gawad Manlilikha ng Bayan” (National Living Human Treasures) to traditional artists in weaving, pottery, basketry, music, and performance to promote the traditional art as high art (De Leon, 1998). Alongside the award is the responsibility to create Centers for Living Tradition where indigenous knowledge can be taught and transmitted. Funded by the government, we have still yet to see its effect on these communities and how it will affect social relations, inside and outside their communities. What is significant at the concept of these “centers” is that it takes the place of the traditional museum where it is clearly not needed.

In the Philippines, we need to reassess the museum practice in the light of local realities, coming face to face with political and economic marginalization, as well as globalization in the form of diasporic communities comprised by millions of Filipinos working abroad. And recently, a widening interest in the institution of local museums are springing in the regions as local communities grapple with their own sense of identity, as well as the political symbolism of a museum in a small town.

It is also noteworthy to cite the case of the Museo Ilocos Norte where traditional life is represented through farming implements and the Spanish influence on everyday life. The story of this historical tobacco factory turned museum is a story of how patronage of an elite can hasten the establishment of a local museum. However, a conversation with one of the guides reveals this interesting feedback: non-Ilocano visitors and tourists appreciate the display more than the Ilocano themselves. The reason is that some Ilocano visitors expect in museums displays fine art objects alone and certainly not of everyday life that is

easily found outside its walls. While the intention of the museum was to promote Ilocano heritage for its people, the museum has begun to establish the widened arena of the definition of art.⁴

Turning Museums into Spaces of Engagement of the Constitution of Local Culture

What we construe as "Filipino culture" is always mediated by invented concepts and agencies of modernity—nation-state, school, media, and museums. As Stuart Hall has suggested, "The nation-state was never simply a political entity. It was also a symbolic formation—'a system of representation,' which produced an 'idea of the nation as an imagined community,' with whose meanings we could identify and which through this imaginary identification, constituted its citizen as 'subjects'" (Hall, 1999). Yet, as we are citizens that are shaped by our particular society and culture, it must also be recognized that people are also active social actors that have the capacity to recreate or reinvent selves in every context and milieu. Museums then can be an instrument of both suppression and empowerment by addressing the issue of perspective on what constitute the everyday: For whom is the representation? Who benefits from the discourse of authenticity? Why is the discourse of an everyday life that is rooted to an idyllic past important to a modern audience?

In the projects of imagining a nation, a lived experience by its indigenous communities becomes the carrier of ethnicity, perhaps as a reminder of what was before modernity. Towns in the Philippines are now all vying to become the Destination—or the locale becoming a focal point of the privileged gaze. With this comes the much needed income so that "tourism" is now equated with "jobs." Attracting a bored citizenry who have lost their identity and sense of self because of modernity is now a big business. The arts and tradition of the Filipinos have answered this need in contemporary times. However, excesses have occurred many times, appropriating cultural practices and inventing traditions not culturally rooted to the place—exoticizing indigenous traditions through costumes and street dancing competitions. The desire of local communities to create an identity of its own—in other words, to be a destination—is the context where folk craft now inhabits. Folk craft and everyday objects have been appropriated for purposes of regional and local identities, to counteract their perceived marginalization vis-à-vis the favored large urban centers.

How then do we turn museums into a live, cultural space of engagement and not as “narratives of loss”? As a component of public culture, one must redefine a museum’s role beyond “collection and display,” turning the notion of the museum audience as an actual community which have stakes in its representation. It is of people and communities having the power to reclaim historical memories and create meaning for them, not given didactically. The role of a nation-state and its relation to the museum must be reviewed also as to be more engaging with the public, to be more people-oriented rather than object-oriented. This means more programs of dialogue and museum education of viewing in the hope of encouraging a multi-perspective view on issues concerning a changing society, of communities having social connections with other communities. We hope for museums that will develop an audience of not primarily of connoisseurs but socially aware individuals. Collaborative curatorship must be encouraged as this is a terrain of hybrid meanings involving multidisciplinary approaches and knowledge, working with the community people themselves. Only then that everyday displays of life will still be valid if it articulates unsaid hopes and tensions in civil society—the past and present clearly connected, center and periphery actively resolved. Our task then is to surface the issue of local cultures being manipulated by partisan interests and locate culture within the context of people’s social realities. If culture is born out of a process of negotiation, we hope to envision museums that take interest in a participatory process where audience becomes “stakeholders” in the very constitution definition and relevance of museums in specific Philippine localities.

The Direction: Community Museums

What is a community museum? By appending the word “community” to the word “museum,” the concept is hoping to redirect the museum practice to face existing realities in many communities which experienced exploitation and loss of cultural justice due to the project of an “imagined nation.” According to Carlisle Levine, it is a “museum which is in the hands of the community: born out of, developed, and administered by and for the community” (1997). According to a workshop in Asian community museums in 1997, the issues and concerns carried by a community museum range from being: 1) “centers of local development, conserving and recuperating community history, cultural values and traditional technology, and serving as focal points for local organizational strengthening”; 2) “preservation of both tangible and intangible heritage such as oral traditions, folklore, rituals and

indigenous knowledge"; and 3) "a place to rediscover the community identity and to empower community members in the face of rapid economic development and the globalization of mass culture."

Community museums purposely try to get out of the mould of old museological practice of colonial mapping, careless and decontextualized appropriation of indigenous cultural resources as representations of people and nations. A community museum's new role is to "empower the many peripheral rural communities, touching endangered livelihoods, environment and resource base, customs and rituals, oral and performing traditions and elements of their knowledge and skills" (Chakravarty, 1997). A Japanese theoretician, Toshiro Ito, was cited to have explained that "a community museum is oriented primarily to the local community, as opposed to the nation's center or the needs of tourism ... new community values are discovered by adopting an approach based in the community's own agenda; in other words, a revival of the overall identity belonging to the community" (Asaji, 1997).

Rather than presenting everyday life as an unchanging past, exhibits are meant to provoke dialogue that can help in community development. Many countries have adopted this perspective. In Australia where aboriginal people are marginalized by a white-dominated society, some museums have devised policies that would ensure the rights of the indigenous population to their material culture and are in fact encouraging them to pinpoint research topics that are meaningful to them (Gordon, 1997). In Japan, where modernity has rapidly altered the life ways of the Japanese, community museums are seen not as an end in itself but rather as a tool that local people can use for evaluating a modern lifestyle that has become too uniform. A community conducting their own research, whether through beachcombing or bird watching, allows them to discover the community itself. This forms the stimulus for an ordinary citizen becoming a "stakeholder" in the community and its future. For this is what it is all about: building a conscious community of people who believe that Philippine localities are cultural spaces which are important in understanding a negotiated identity in this complex world.

The Project: A Community Museum in Bago City, Negros Occidental

The initial idea for this project was simple—how to make a museum a people oriented space rather than an elite space where objects gather dust. How can a museum contribute to create a sense of a community rather than alienate it? The answer was difficult and long—but certainly this project provided a fruitful journey of rediscovery and commitment to our land and culture.

With the help of the Asian Public Intellectuals Follow-up Grant, I was able to do a collaborative project with the Balay ni Tan Juan Historical House Museum in initiating a community exhibit in Bago City, Negros Occidental. From April 2004 to April 2005, a series of workshops were conducted with participants coming from the different sectors and *barangay* representatives of Bago City. The workshops were geared towards creating a community exhibit actively participated in by the people themselves including conceptualization, object collection and installation, as well as conducting a sustainable museum education program. These workshop outputs on cultural research methods, local culture and history, curatorship and museum education program were integrated to the visual design and concept of the exhibit called "*Kabuhi sa Bago: A Community Exhibit*" or "*Life in Bago: A Community Exhibit*." It opened November 5, 2004 as joint project of the API Follow-Up Program of the Nippon Foundation (Japan) and the City of Bago in time for their annual festival that commemorates the historical event called "*A Cinco de Noviembre*" when the Negros province declared their independence from Spanish colonizers in 1898.

The site of the exhibit is the historical residence of Don Juan Araneta, popularly known as Tan Juan, who led the revolution against the Spanish regime in Negros. At present, Tan Juan's house was bequeathed to the local government to be used as a museum. While the house was undergoing the much-needed reconstruction and renovation, its curator, Mr. Clemente Del Castillo was open to the idea of developing it into a community museum—turning the "elite" space into a "community" space where people can go, learn and discuss the culture and history of Bago City. The structure is currently being restored to firm up its structural support. It is being managed by the local government but has few materials collection, lacks a sustainable museum education program and has not established a relationship with its immediate community. The museum only maintains a budget to pay for the staff but has no significant budget for exhibition and museum education programs.⁵

There is no denying the fact that the local government welcomed the project as it envisioned that a museum could help in promoting Bago City as a tourist attraction in Negros in competition with well-preserved old towns such as Silay and Talisay. However, for the participants who devoted time, effort, and talent to the project, it was understood that the community museum is really meant for them—understanding where they are now in Bago history. The concern for tourists coming to Bago was secondary. A community museum can only be possible in this manner. If the main concern will be the tourist, then the result will

just be exoticization. But if the main concern is the articulation of people's voices, the hope for an "authentic" voice coming from below is possible.

The Community Exhibit: Kabuhi sa Bago

The exhibit has two components: the first is the barangay exhibit which includes their historical memories, collected objects from the past, and cultural map where the people's own valuation of their local history and cultural tangible heritage were given meaning and importance. The second is the importance of rice and sugar in their everyday life—which includes farm, storage, and cooking implements. Photography, drawings, and the participants' own language were incorporated in the exhibit. The importance of cultural research in a community museum is crucial to the project as it points to their cultural heritage such as the old *simburyo* or sugar mill chimneys made of river stones, and the "re-discovery" of the traditional cookie *alfajor* (sun-dried rice and sugar cookies) which is in danger of disappearing because people don't give importance to it.

In comparison to the old museum practice, we did not start with a collection, but rather with cultural research in the local culture. The participants were taught various research methodologies such as cultural mapping and cultural calendar. But the interview method was redefined as their traditional concepts of *kuwentuhan* and *kapihan*. Once the data were gathered, these were processed in workshops that yielded dialogue and interpretation. Local stories surrounding particular sites emerged, whether historical or mythical. As a group, everybody went around each other's barangay and became interested in each other's problem beyond their own political territory. They saw connectedness and similarities in their experiences. Finally, they were asked to gather objects that would have "value" for the people of their barangay, the result was a very human interpretation of their community's experiences. Over 200 objects were borrowed ranging from antique "santos" to an "arinola"—every single one with a story to tell about the war, about a loved one, about spirits in nature, about their life as farmers. Clearly, a community museum's objective here is not just pure aesthetic, nor is it about *culture* per se, but about the *community*, as it tries to recuperate the past and understand the present.⁶

Possibilities and Challenges of a Community Museum in the Philippines

The project aims to realize an "imagined community" in the context of social actors actively responding to issues of power or disempowerment in terms of

historical memory, economic direction, social inequity, and cultural representation. Through a collaborative and participative manner, an installation of an exhibit of cultural life, in its diversity and commonality, the community of Bago City underwent a process of creating and re-creating "selves" in the hope of claiming a space in historical memory as well as social and cultural empowerment. The essence of a community museum is that it is not the structure per se, but the continuous process of producing knowledge by the people, in order to better understand present realities and inspire the capacity to "create" and its concurrent possibility of change.

It is in this perspective that I also argue for the experience of lowlanders who experienced colonization, migration, and dislocation that the resultant experience, history and culture is also "indigenous cultural resource." These are the silences in our national history—the voice of our people and their crucial understanding of what is tangible and intangible heritage, from their unique perspective of oppression, poverty, and continuing feudal relations ... Transforming the elite space of Balay ni Tan Juan into a community space is significant. A community museum will have a great impact on many levels: first is to the people of Bago themselves who need to assert their version of history from the point of view of sugar workers who have plowed these lands in the last 150 years, balancing the elite view of Negrense history; secondly, the other towns and districts of Negros Occidental will welcome a community museum different from the highly urbanized Bacolod and will improve local eco-tourism that is people-oriented and not prone to stereotyping; thirdly, museum workers will be trained in curatorial work as well as develop and maintain a museum education program; fourthly, local artisans and craftsmen will have a chance to engage with the community in a dignified manner and will be given cognizance as keepers of knowledge and traditions; and lastly, audience development primarily through the school system will be given importance so that the youth may learn the importance of their local history and culture. Overall, the development of a community museum in the Philippines may be seen as an important step in mitigating the Manila-oriented version of a "national" culture by empowering people in the margins to imagine themselves based on their experiences and realities.

Working in collaboration with people concerned in creating community museums as "spaces of engagement," the vision to turn the museum from an elite oriented space into a community space that is meaningful to the present is an important initiative in the Philippines where the concept of culture is dominated by its elitist connotation. Significantly, an art and cultural perspective are tools of

empowering people on how to look at themselves in a contextual manner and not just passively accept the elite families' version of their history and culture. There is a rich undercurrent of a "history from below" that is only now being realized in Negros and working in a "community museum" setup will encourage a dialogue that has not frequently happened. Aside from working with the Bago community of farmers and sugar workers, folk crafts people such as weavers, potters and contemporary artists, the project wishes to mount an exhibit that will deal with historical memory, folk culture, and the community's agricultural life cycle that is always connected with national and global concerns.⁷

For this project, the community museum is reconstructed not as a status symbol of a nation or as "narratives of loss" but an active reclaiming of cultural and historical memory, which is always in process and not a fossilized fact. Therefore, the heart of a community museum is not just its collection but also the process of a collaborative undertaking and its educational program component that will enliven the museum space. The citizens of Negros Occidental will also have a chance to "mirror" themselves in such a museum, a space where they can reflect on their history and culture. Such a museum might also serve as one of the models for other community museums in the country or in Southeast Asia. Many local government units in the Philippines are clamoring for museums in their own towns with the mistaken agenda of purely touristic purposes. Beginning this initiative and working with a local government unit might prove that it is possible that alternative voices can come out in the open without the fear and influence of partisan politics.

Finally, let me say that at the heart of my belief in cultural empowerment is the realization that without an aware citizenry at the local level, there would be no significant changes in the national political-scape in the Philippines, nor will there be empathy with the larger concerns of Asia and the world. The work for a cultural worker is here—and it cannot wait. As for the academic in me, learning from people and communities (and their lessons of resiliency in the face of adversities) has been very rewarding experience—a journey that I hope will continue in the future. ☺

ENDNOTES

¹ This paper was initially presented to the National Congress on Appropriating Indigenous Cultural Resources in Festivals and other Spectacles on October 20, 2006 at the Philippine Social Science Center, Quezon City.

² At this point I need to explain that I'm speaking from the two voices—as an academic and a cultural worker. I have been teaching Art Studies for eighteen years and I realize that theory is not enough. For theories to be “useful,” I embarked in community work through Baglan Art and Community Initiatives which believes that the key to people empowerment and human development is through the arts.

³ Another issue that the paper deals with is the concept of representation that arises from imagining selves, nations and communities in the museum gaze. Taking off from Benedict Anderson's notion of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) and Eric Hobsbawm and Ernst Gellner's “invented tradition”, we can examine the Philippines as a cultural construct created by the intellectual elites appropriated in political and economic policies of the state. As Hobsbawm has suggested, it is a mistake to think of a “nation” as an unchanging social entity. It is rather of a “particular and historically recent entity, relating to a certain kind of modern state” (Hobsbawm 1990). When we think of nation as a project, we can imagine it as an artefact, an invention and as a product of social engineering that enters into the making of nations. With this point of view, the concept of a nation is not a static one, but an active engagement with people's imagination.

⁴ The process of reification of folk art objects happen when everyday things become acquirable possessions as what happened at the Cabanatuan City Museum in 1992. As my hometown, I helped the local government at that time to start a historical and thematic exhibit of this fast-changing city. Initiating an on-loan temporary collection from the rural barangays, we borrowed a huge *kawa* or *talyasi* that this village used for cooking during collective celebrations and events. Come opening day, the decontextualized *talyasi* is transformed—the everyday object becomes art by virtue of the museum space and was eyed by antique collectors. Museums appropriating everyday folk materials contributed to the idea of acquirable art mostly for urban consumers of culture, pointing to a democratization of symbolic and material culture. Yet a revaluation of folk art is in order to widen its definition that would incorporate notions of “cultural justice,” facing the fact that the objects we admire so much also connotes meanings of unequal relations of urban and regional development, and of marginalization in the national imaginary. We only need to be reminded of the T'boli culture's exploited people where a multinational corporation encroaches on their land growing pineapples for a global market. The circulation of the T'boli textile and brassware are now so popular and widely accepted as a national treasure

in our country, yet the province of South Cotabato time and again becomes a site of recurring and unresolved violence in Philippine society.

⁵ In terms of finances, the API grant paid for the cost of materials including the electrical needs of the exhibit, airfare, services, board and lodging of the staff, workshops, and honoraria of consultants. As their financial counterpart, Bago City shouldered the local transportation needs, workshop venues, provided carpentry services, promotion, and opening day ceremonies. More than 150 people directly participated in the project, including the active participation of the twenty-four barangay representatives of the city and 100 more that contributed or loaned objects for the exhibit, which date from the 18th century to the 1960s. The curatorial process was collaborative with Dr. Brenda Fajardo (who hails from Bago City) and Mr. Tanni Pangilinan of Digerati (a multimedia company) as co-curators with the participants and the BTJ staff helping out in any way they can. Hopefully, the exhibit will last five to eight years given the quality of the tarpaulin materials that were used. Although in keeping with the idea of community empowerment and knowledge transfer, the participants may choose to revise it according to their felt need and availability of resources. Indeed, from my point of view, a dynamic changing exhibit is more desirable than a static one.

⁶ At the moment, the objects that were collected from the twenty-four barangays are on a lease basis. The staff has been given training in conducting guided tours. An organization called Abyan (Friends) also evolved from the participants to the workshops that support the programs and promotions, including members of the Araneta family. A museum education program was also started by holding an art workshop for the youth sector and senior citizens of the community. Many were eager for such an event because they said that there are no venues and opportunities to learn about artistic methods and discussions. The exhibit space provided a gallery for their works wherein they draw landscapes and genre scenes of their villages. Art materials were donated to each barangay hall so that they can continue to practice and maybe even encourage people to explore the possibilities of art making. All in all, the project experimented with the possibilities and challenges in realizing a community exhibit in the Philippines. Other local government units have expressed their desire to emulate the project and hopefully it will provide an alternative way of creating a cultural program for their communities.

⁷ At the moment, Mr. Del Castillo is thinking of converting the second floor into a History of Bago through a genealogical approach—family histories. It will be composed of both elite and poor families, both political and cultural roles, family of boxers, weavers, *kakanin* makers, etc. It is also hoped that the process of reconstructing memory from the point of view of the disempowered in official history along with the understanding of the role of living traditions in contemporary society will enhance the goal of creating a vibrant community responsive to the needs of the times. A realistic community museum program

and activities throughout the year has been set up. Hopefully, it will be sustainable, dynamic, responsive, and empowering. Using local resources and practices, a year-long museum program will be coordinated with the school curriculum that is envisioned to be participative and engaging.

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The paper would like to contribute to the discourse on the politics of public culture in the Philippines by examining the museum practice that deals with displays of "everyday life" that represent notions of local culture.¹ In an era where "globality" is encroaching on a nation's political, economic, social, and cultural agenda, the presence of a significant variety of museums dealing with traditional life (peasant) and folk objects is a problematic issue of representation and ideological construction of Philippine communities which are grappling with modernity and its effects on everyday life. Recognizing the dangers of museums presenting an exotic gaze on "othered" ethnicities and communities for urban consumption, we can ask: What kind of aesthetics are being constructed and for what purpose? How is the issue of identity being addressed in such a museum and for whom?

Keeping in mind the importance of differences in the mode of production and reception of displayed objects, people as individuals and as a collective construct meaningful signification to what the museum represents in civil society. Museums are spaces where the discourse of an authentic culture through exhibits of "everyday life" is transformed into "displayed life." In the midst of criticism of the prevalent "self-orientalization" or "nativism" in ethnographic and folk museums or even national museums, there is a need to reevaluate the role of such public institutions so that it can address the politics of identity construction and a nation's imagination of itself. Therefore, the paper aims to explore the following ideas: 1) evaluate museum practices dealing with everyday life as sites of "identity construction" of an imagined nation; 2) problematize the issue of representation of "local culture" as appropriated in the museum practice and its relation to tourism; and 3) explore the challenges and possibilities of initiating community museums in the Philippine localities as alternative to the traditional museum